DRAFT

TO: Task Force on Student Social Life

FROM: Task Force on Composition of the Student Body

SUBJECT: Concerns Regarding Student Social Life

DATE: May 1, 1989

The Task Force on Composition of the Student Body is particularly concerned that the College's considerable efforts to attract students from a broad range of racial, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds continue to be supported and reaffirmed as students move through their years on campus. There is little question that growing diversification of the student body has put, and will put, increased demands on existing student services and on the campus community as a whole. It is our strong belief, however, that if diversification is to be realized to its full potential, the Middlebury College community must be one in which students of all backgrounds not only feel welcome at the outset, but experience a comfort level that enables them to participate fully and comfortably in the College community throughout their years here.

A number of discussions, spurred by a letter from Richard Demerle, cause us to believe that this is not necessarily the case at present. We believe strongly that it does the College little good to attract diverse students if they do not feel this is a place where they would want to remain. In point of fact, the negative feelings of those who leave before graduation can be tremendously damaging both to the individual and to our future efforts to attract students of just such backgrounds. It is critical, therefore, that the quality and tone of an individual's experience here not work against the institution's larger, stated goals.

Our concern focuses on a perceived lack of an on-going intellectual life outside of the classroom setting; that is, extended and informal opportunities for meaningful dialogue and thoughtful debate throughout the full course of any given week. Our concern extends to residential housing situations which are, in essence, each student's home outside of the classroom.

Specifically, a significant number of students who choose not to drink or to "party" feel they are making the concomitant decision to step out of the Middlebury mainstream, to "go it alone." If, in making this decision, they do not find a substantive, alternative life of the mind here, the question of "fit" at Middlebury becomes a very real issue. There is little doubt that the assumptions and actions associated with "Club Midd" combined with the amount of dorm damage and drinking that occurs on campus often creates an alienating environment for some of the very students we work so hard to attract. Importantly, the benefits of diversity are little felt when sequestered to the solitude of an individual's own room.

While there is, and should be, continued discussion on how to address unacceptable behavior in the residence halls (especially as it relates to substance abuse), we believe it is equally important to sustain and support those students who prefer and seek a more intellectual climate. In short, the social life of the campus should seek to bolster and encourage the richness of our diversity, not stifle, subvert, or drive it elsewhere.

We acknowledge that this is not a simple issue. We also acknowledge and applaud the numerous people who continue to invest substantial amounts of personal time and energy in this direction. It is important work and it is by no means easy. This position statement is written with the sincere hope that the Task Force on Student Social Life will keep these issues in the forefront as it addresses the climate of our residential system and the ripple effects this climate has, not only on current students but on our work as a leading academic institution.

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